Using sense relations in teaching vocabulary for English language learners

Nghiêm Thị Thuỷ*

*Trường Đại học Tài nguyên và Môi trường Hà Nội

Abstract: *Vocabulary knowledge is a fundamental component of language learning, especially for English language learners (ELLs). Effective vocabulary instruction involves more than memorizing word lists; it requires understanding the intricate relationships between words. Sense relations, including synonyms, antonyms, hyponyms, and homonyms, provide a framework that helps learners deepen their understanding of vocabulary and use it effectively. This article explores how sense relations can be integrated into vocabulary teaching to enhance learners' comprehension and expression.*

Keywords: *Vocabulary, sense relations, teaching, learning*

1. Introduction

Language is the cornerstone of communication, and vocabulary forms the foundation of language proficiency. For English language learners, acquiring vocabulary is often a challenging yet essential task. As Wilkins (1972) famously stated, "without grammar, very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed." This highlights the importance of vocabulary in language learning and communication.

Teaching vocabulary effectively goes beyond teaching isolated words; it involves understanding how words relate to one another. Sense relations offer a systematic approach to vocabulary instruction, enabling learners to make connections between words and deepen their language comprehension. By leveraging these relationships, educators can facilitate more meaningful and effective vocabulary acquisition.

2. Literature review

2.1. Vocabulary

Definitions of vocabulary

The understanding of words and their meanings is referred to as vocabulary. More specifically, Linse (2005) defined vocabulary as the collection of words an individual knows; meanwhile, Hornby (2000)believed it is all the words a person knows or uses when talking about a particular subject in a specific language. Therefore, it can be concluded that vocabulary consists of all the words in each language a person understands or uses to communicate successfully.

Aspects of vocabulary

Nation (2001) believed that knowing a word means mastering three aspects: form, meaning and use. The form of a word consists of pronunciation, spelling, parts, and word family. The meaning of a word includes form-meaning relationships, concepts and references, and associations. Similarly, mastering the use of a word means mastering its grammatical functions, collocations, and constraints on use.

Importance of vocabulary teaching and learning

Swan and Walter (1984) stated, "Vocabulary acquisition is the largest and most important task facing the language learner." Moreover, Dellar and Hocking (1999) argue that learners' English proficiency will see limited improvement if they focus primarily on studying grammar. This perspective is echoed by Thornbury (2002), who asserts that learners will make the most progress if they expand their vocabulary. He emphasizes that while grammar is necessary, it is through vocabulary that learners can effectively convey almost any idea.

2.2. Vocabulary teaching techniques

Santoshi (2011) listed some techniques for teaching vocabulary, such as:

- Realia: Realia is the use of a real object. The teacher can bring natural objects such as a postcard, pen, ball, etc. It is particularly beneficial for teaching young learners.

- Pictures: When it is impossible to bring concrete objects into the classroom, pictures can be used. The teacher can draw pictures on the board or bring pictures of magazines.

- Mime and action: Mime and action can be utilized to successfully demonstrate the meaning of action verbs, moods, and emotions.

- Explanation: We can also teach the meaning of words by explaining them in context.

- Translation: We can also translate the new word's meaning into the student's native language. It is excellent for teaching the meaning of abstract words.

- Sense relations: We can teach the meaning of new words by using sense relations such as hyponyms, synonyms, antonyms, and homonyms.

Teachers can employ various techniques to achieve the objectives of the vocabulary lessons.

2.3. Sense relations

Kreider (1998) defined sense relations as the relationships between words in terms of meaning, including synonymy, hyponymy, antonymy, and homonymy. This section will focus on these four key sense relations.

Hyponymy

Hyponymy involves the relationship between a specific word and its broader category, known as a hypernym. For example, "cat" and "dog" are hyponyms of "animal." Hyponymy isn't limited to nouns; verbs like "clean" have hyponyms such as "sweep" and "wipe." These relationships vary across languages, with hyponyms and hypernyms often having multiple layers. For instance, "fry" is a hyponym of "cook" and a hypernym for types of frying like "stir-fry."

Synonymy

Richards and Schmidt (2002) defined synonyms as words with the same or nearly the same meaning. Synonymy allows lexical items to be interchangeable without altering the sentence's meaning. Examples include "present/gift," "start/begin," and "glad/happy."

Antonymy

Antonymy refers to words with opposite meanings. Kreidler (1998) described antonyms as pairs that make opposite statements about the same subject, such as "good/bad" and "old/young." Hu (2001) categorized antonyms into three types: gradable (e.g., "tall/short"), complementary (e.g., "pass/fail"), and converse (e.g., "lend/borrow"). Gradable antonyms express a spectrum, while complementary antonyms are absolute, and converse antonyms depend on each other.

3. Application of sense relations in vocabulary teaching and learning

Integrating sense relations into vocabulary teaching requires thoughtful planning and creative instructional strategies. Here are some practical applications to consider:

3.1. Semantic mapping

Semantic mapping involves creating visual representations of words and their relationships. Teachers can encourage students to create mind maps that connect a central word to its synonyms, antonyms, hyponyms, and related words. This visual approach helps learners see connections between words and reinforces memory through active engagement. For instance, if the central word is "happy," students can branch out to related words like "joyful," "content," "ecstatic," and their opposites such as "sad" or "unhappy." These connections help deepen understanding and recall, as students can visualize and remember the relationships between words more effectively.

3.2. Contextualized learning

Teaching vocabulary in context is crucial for understanding its use and meaning. Teachers can use authentic texts, such as stories, articles, and dialogues, to highlight sense relations. For example, when teaching the word "bright," learners can be exposed to sentences that use it in different senses, such as "a bright idea" (metaphorically) and "a bright light" (literally). By analyzing how words function within sentences and paragraphs, learners gain insights into their meanings and connections. Moreover, this method can extend to examining word collocations, phrases, and idioms, which helps students grasp the nuances and varied applications of vocabulary in real-life contexts.

3.3. Interactive activities

Engaging learners in interactive activities promotes active learning and retention. Teachers can design activities like word-matching games, crossword puzzles, and vocabulary quizzes that focus on sense relations. These activities encourage learners to think critically about word meanings and relationships while having fun. Additionally, incorporating technology, such as language learning apps or online games, can make these activities more engaging and accessible for students.

3.4. Role-playing and simulations

Role-playing and simulations provide opportunities for learners to apply vocabulary in real-life situations. By acting out scenarios and using sense relations to navigate conversations, learners develop practical language skills. For example, a role-play involving a customer and a salesperson can highlight synonyms and antonyms related to products and services. In this scenario, the salesperson might use words like

"affordable" or "expensive," and the customer might ask for something "cheaper" or "higher quality." Such activities not only help students practice vocabulary in a meaningful context but also enhance their ability to communicate effectively and fluently in various situations.

4. Implications for teaching and learning vocabulary

As mentioned in the previous parts, knowing a word means mastering three aspects: form, meaning and use. Based on the given aspects, some implications for vocabulary teaching and learning using sense relations will be provided.

4.1. Form

The form of a word consists of pronunciation, spelling, parts, and word family. Teachers should play the recording of the native speakers saying the words first to introduce the pronunciation of the words to the students. After students get the pronunciation, spelling would be focused on by asking them to write the words in the book together with the parts of speech and word family (if any). If there are any sense relations, students can be required to share their knowledge so that others familiarize themselves with the forms and avoid errors caused by confusing spelling and pronunciation of similar words.

4.2. Meaning

The meaning of a word includes form-meaning relationships, concepts and references, and associations. Teachers should motivate students to explain the meaning of new words using synonymy, antonymy, and hyponymy provided by the teacher and direct students' attention to the semantic relationship words of the new words while introducing new vocabulary. In this step, the instructor invites students to form groups to share information and discuss problems. In addition, teachers should provide time for students to develop self-learning skills and master the approach to acquiring words. Since students have limited expertise with other languages, they should seek the assistance of teachers when using flexible semantic analysis or basic category vocabulary theory to develop a target word semantic network.

4.3. Use

Mastering the use of a word means mastering its grammatical functions, collocations, and constraints on use. As our goals are for students to identify and use the words properly after every vocabulary lesson, there should be some activities to check whether they can achieve them. When the semantic relationship for the new words is established, the procedures to use

new words become essential. Teachers can assign students to create short paragraphs or essays using newly learnt vocabulary and related semantic words. In this way, students can learn about word collocation and proper word usage using new vocabulary.

5. Conclusion

This research investigates the acquisition of English vocabulary using semantic field theory. This paper then defines the sense relations theory with four common types, namely hyponymy, synonymy, antonymy, and homonymy, and provides instances for each. The next part proposes some implications for teaching English using sense relations. These sense relations assist students in constructing a mental network of related words, which facilitates memorization and retrieval of lexical items, enhancing fluency. They also represent a logical approach for children to organize new language, which aids memorization. Furthermore, they make students feel more confident and proficient while speaking about a specific topic because they have learned and memorized the necessary language.

Teaching vocabulary – the aspect of language teaching that has attracted considerable attention-remains a complex issue for researchers. Due to a lack of time and research skills, this paper can only focus on some widespread sense relations. In the future, additional research on applying each sort of sense relations should be undertaken so that new and creative approaches to promoting vocabulary teaching and learning can be identified.

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